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Cambodian Rebels Face Uphill Battle Against Vietnam-Backed Regime

By NICK B. WILLIAMS Jr.,

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia— Late last month, anti-government guerrillas reported that they attacked Phnom Penh's Pochetong Airport, killing 23 Vietnamese soldiers, destroying two planes and blowing up ammunition and fuel depots.

Early in March, the guerrillas said, they fired rockets into two markets in this Communist capital.

But American reporters who arrived here within days of the reported raids could find no evidence that either attack had actually taken place.

At the airport, three guards, rifles slung on their shoulders, casually surveyed arriving passengers. Staffing was so light that a customs clerk had to be summoned with a shout to clear the baggage.

No Memory of Attacks

There was no sign of recent fire or fighting, except for a burned-out shack near the airport.

No international aid workers interviewed here recalled hearing sounds of a battle at the airport, a 20-minute drive from the heart of the city. And no one, Cambodian or foreigner, had evidence of a rocket attack on the city markets, which are usually crowded because there is little else to do in Phnom Penh.

Western intelligence officers and reporters tend to discount claims by both sides in the long-running Cambodian war. The guerrillas' claim seemed an especially foolish bit of radio propaganda, so easily checked by international visitors here.

But it made one-day headlines in Bangkok, the capital of neighboring Thailand. In a largely unseen war, radio is a weapon, particularly for the guerrillas. Otherwise, their progress on the battlefield and in diplomacy seems stalemated at best.

Kong Korm, Cambodia's deputy foreign minister, dismissed the claims as evidence of desperation. "At present, our enemies cannot stay put in any place," he said in an hourlong interview at the ministry. "They seem to be in complete defeat."

The guerrillas have been unable to rebound as a unified resistance since the Vietnamese army, which installed the present government in Phnom Penh in early 1979, wiped out the rebels' military camps along the Thai border in the 1984-85 dry-season winter offensive.

The Khmer Rouge, a Communist faction led by Pol Pot that established a brutal rule here from 1975 to 1979, has remained the most effective guerrilla force arrayed against the present Vietnamese-backed government. Western intelligence reports that the Khmer Rouge have been active in the west, in the north around the Tonle Sap, a large inland lake, and in the southeast near the Vietnamese border.

It was Khmer Rouge radio that reported the alleged airport and market raids. Khmer Rouge radio also reported a guerrilla raid on the town of Kompong Speu, about 30 miles southwest of Phnom Penh, in early March. That claim might have more credence, since a Western reporter scheduled to visit the

town was denied permission at the last minute.

Staging their forays from western Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge and two non-Communist guerrilla groups face a series of obstacles as they try to move into the Cambodian heartland.

Foremost is the Vietnamese army here, 160,000 or more well-trained, well-armed troops. The Vietnamese are bolstered by the far less formidable forces of the Phnom Penh government, regulars and militia units.

Infiltration routes from the west have been disrupted by Vietnamese sweeps and by ditches and other barriers built by Cambodian civilian brigades. The guerrillas and their supporters call the brigades forced labor, but the government here says the work is voluntary, "a patriotic duty."

Som Chhay, 43, head of the Kean

Svay district in Kandal province, said he led two civilian work brigades west last year, each numbering about 190 people.

In an interview at district headquarters, about 10 miles outside Phnom Penh, he said a third group, numbering 230, left in February.

His groups traveled to Battambang, a western Cambodian town, along with other "volunteers" from Kandal province, Som Chhay said. Their mission: to repair roads and level underbrush to "expand the fields for cultivation."

Each group stayed about 45 days, he said, and was given food, medicine and clothing by the government, but no pay.

Thai and Western intelligence officials say the civilian brigades are clearing the area of cover to expose intruding guerrillas and also are maintaining roads to allow movement by Vietnamese and Cambodian troops during the coming rainy season. At any one time, they say, as many as 25,000 civilians may be working in the western labor brigades.

"We had our own defense force," said Som Chhay, the district chief, "about 15 men in each group carrying rifles."

He said the men from Kean Svay district did not approach the Thai border, about 50 miles west of Battambang, and encountered no guerrillas.

Vietnamese and Cambodian troops are not the only problems facing the guerrillas.

Thailand and other members of the non-Communist Assn. of Southeast Asian Nations predicted that there would be a positive side to the Vietnamese victories along the border a year ago, that the resistance forces would be forced to penetrate into the interior instead of hugging the Thai border in relative safety.

On a broad scale, it has not happened, according to intelligence reports in Bangkok and by some of the guerrillas' own admissions.

Loosely joined politically as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia), the guerrillas show little inclination to work together on the military level.

One of the major factions, the non-Communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front under former Cambodian Prime Minister Son Sann, has been self-destructing in a leadership struggle for the past six months. The command confusion has restricted the activities of Khmer Front guerrillas, reportedly never as aggressive as the other factions in the first place.

The strongest guerrilla force is the Khmer Rouge, which fields an estimated 35,000 fighters, several thousand more than the Cambodian army.

The third faction represents troops loyal to Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the former Cambodian leader and head of the resistance political coalition. He has twice threatened to give up the fight in the past six months because of clashes between his guerrillas and the Khmer Rouge inside Cambodia.

Internal problems among the guerrillas have been exploited by the Phnom Penh government and its Vietnamese allies.

Ngô Dien, the Vietnamese ambassador in Phnom Penh, repeated the Hanoi line in an interview here: The Vietnamese will withdraw their forces by 1990, and it is up to the Cambodians to solve their political differences.

Kong Korm, the deputy foreign minister, said his government, under President Heng Samrin, is willing to talk with the guerrilla

factions about a settlement, "but not until the Pol Pot clique is completely eliminated."

He denied that his government has invited Prince Sihanouk to return to Phnom Penh in some capacity, a reported ploy seen by Western analysts as a bid to split the resistance.

"We cannot say what Sihanouk wants, what he'd like to do," Kong Korm said. "First we meet, we reach an agreement. Then we'll see."

If no settlement is reached by 1988, he said, the Phnom Penh government, with the help of Vietnam, will go all-out for a military victory.

He also said his government has made no decision on elections under a political settlement.

Last year, his boss, Foreign Minister Hun Sen, said only that the Communist Party will be allowed on the ballot and that resistance leaders—excepting Khmer Rouge—could run for office only as individuals. But Kong Korm said in the early March interview that conditions of elections would be based on settlement talks, if they are held.

And he denied that the Vietnamese are calling the shots, politically or militarily, in Cambodia.

"On those battlefields that are big and important, we request the Vietnamese to cooperate," he said. "For other localities where we are able, we let the armed forces of the PRK (People's Republic of Kampuchea) do the job."

Kong Korm is a former language teacher. As is the case with many other officials at his level and below, he is not, by his own account, a longtime player in Cambodia's revolutionary wars.

At the top, the Phnom Penh government is ruled by former Khmer Rouge commanders—Heng Samrin, Hun Sen and others—who broke with Pol Pot and aligned themselves with the Vietnamese Communist Party.

There is no evident split between the top and men like Kong Korm, but there is an apparent nationalistic streak among Cambodian officials at the second level, men who suffered directly at the hands of Pol Pot, and they may be more unbending than the Vietnamese in any settlement proposals.

They think time is on their side, and only a more aggressive guerrilla campaign might change their minds.

Nick B. Williams Jr. wrote this recently while on assignment in Cambodia.